

40 years in the wilderness? - Personal theological reflections on living with ethno-religious diversity 1975-2015.

For just over 40 years I have been living, working and worshipping in multicultural urban communities, for 27 years in East London and for the last 14 in Preston Lancashire. I have been involved in community and social action ministry, employed by different churches and charities, and have served local churches as pastor, preacher, children's worker and trustee. As a sociolinguist and sociologist of religion I have researched and published extensively about ethnic diversity and religion and as a Christian I have reflected theologically about the mission of God in urban settings in Britain. In the first part of my presentation I shall draw together some of the key themes of my work and seek to explore the key social trends over the last 50 years. How are these affecting the life of all our churches in the UK today? Have we been travelling through the wilderness, what have we learned, and are we soon to enter the promised land?

Future Directions for the minority churches in the ecology of God's mission...

In the second part of my presentation I want to look at where we are going, the nature of the mission to which we are being called and the context of society in which we pray, worship and work. Multi-ethnic society has often been described as a mosaic but that gives a static picture. Since we are surrounded by change and growth, and since God is working to transform the universe into a new creation I would rather talk about ecology. In a natural environment plants, animals and other living creatures interact and relate with each other, one flourishes for a season and may then be displaced by another, dying to provide nourishment for the next generation. In the same way churches and other social institutions emerge, flourish and sometimes die, before the risen Lord raises up a new generation. The challenge for each of us and for each local church is to discern and follow our vocation for such a time like this, "to serve the present age, our calling to fulfill" (as Charles Wesley put it). How do we best adapt our church life and mission to the context in which we find ourselves today.

Part 1

Newham 1975..

It is over forty years now since that hot summer day in 1975 when I first went to the Borough of Newham, on an interview for a job as a trainee community worker with the [Newham Community Renewal Programme](#). I enjoyed the interview so much that they had some difficulty getting me to leave, and as I got back on the District Line train at Upton Park I had an overwhelming sense, which I still think was from God, that I would be coming back to live and work, at least for a year or two. As it turned out I was offered the post, I stayed in Newham 27 years.

In the late 1970s we were told that the church would be gone from East London by 2000AD. White Cockney Christians were moving out to Essex and the coast. Those who had got saved had prospered and could afford to flee from the inner city to the suburbs. Those left behind were poorer working class whites who had never really connected with the churches, certainly never become active members though they had various informal religious beliefs and practices where the church played a part especially Christenings and the classic East End funeral and cemetery rituals on mothers day.

But something else was already happening. Immigration from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent, and the most recent wave of East African Asian refugees had arrived and were settling in East Ham and Forest Gate. And they brought with them their faiths, Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam, even a few Buddhists. And the Afro-Caribbeans brought a lively if traditional version of Christianity - some tried to join existing churches but in many places found they were not welcome so organised themselves into new fellowships often in the Pentecostal Holiness tradition. I managed a community centre which had three such congregations and learned to enjoy worship with such groups as the Assemblies of the First born, the New Testament Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy.

There had also been a long established but small Chinese community in East London, the old Chinatown of Limehouse down by the docks. But more typically by then the Chinese were scattered and every neighbourhood had it's Chinese takeaway.

KEY Question: How are cities changing and what do the changing ethnic demographics do to our communities?

The Linguistic Minorities Project (1979-1985)

During the first post war wave of immigration to Britain the problems of social change and settlement were discussed in categories of race or as "the colour problem". Enoch Powell's notorious "rivers of blood" speech in 1968 was rightly condemned by

the liberal establishment and media (including many church leaders), though it did strike a chord with working class white English people in the great cities and there were demonstrations of support from East End dockers and Smithfield market porters. The first Race Relations Act soon followed and immigration continued to increase.

However, by the end of the 1970s the growing diversity of ethnic minorities in Britain meant led to a fragmentation of minority interests and political mobilisation and a change to a discourse of multi-culturalism. How was it possible for the various minority communities to integrate as useful citizens within the British economy and society while at the same time maintaining their cultural heritage and transmitting it to their next generation? Mother tongue education and bilingualism was becoming a key issue and in this context the government commissioned the work of the Linguistic Minorities Project. As a sociolinguist who had just completed an M.Phil study on the language attitudes and ethnic stereotypes of East London teenagers I applied for one of the posts and for five years worked part time for this groundbreaking project. It was my "tent-making" which allowed me to devote the rest of my week to my other role as lay pastor of a tiny Methodist Church in Canning Town. Over 5 years our team carried out numerous surveys of school students, teachers in supplementary schools and adults in the community, covering at least eleven different language groups (identifying another 140 then spoken in England) in cities such as Coventry, Bradford and London.

Our book, "the Other Languages of England" is still an interesting read, and you will be pleased to know that used copies in good condition are still available on Amazon at the bargain price of £0.01 + £2.80 UK delivery.

Within the project I took special responsibility for two language groups, Bangladeshis (with debates about whether they spoke Bengali or Sylheti) and Chinese. So I visited Chinese churches and Saturday schools in the Midlands, worked with Chinese translators and interviewers and compiled a list of all the takeaways in Coventry. In those days the majority of British Chinese were families from Hong Kong and the New Territories, speakers of Cantonese or Hakka. There were a few students and professionals, from Malaysia and Singapore and then in 1981 came the Vietnamese boat people who were mostly ethnic Chinese, settling in towns like Bradford as well as London. In the mid 1980s through the church I belonged to in East London, I encountered and made friends with some Malaysian Chinese people several of whom ended up marrying white English Christians in our local churches. More recently I've noticed higher proportion from the People's Republic and had occasional contact through Christian student work undertaken by academic friends of mine in universities in Luton, Warwick and Preston..

KEY Question: What does language and culture mean to an ethnic minority like the Chinese as the generations born in the UK grow up?

ECRJ - Christian Ethnics

The 1980s was a decade in which there was urban unrest, often described as inner city riots with a racial dimension. Brixton in April 1981 led to the Scarman report which focussed on urban and racial inequality. In July 1981 Toxteth and numerous other

cities had street disturbances and later in the decade the notorious events at Broadwater Farm ended in the murder of a police officer and a famous miscarriage of justice. Young people in urban communities, black young men in particular distrusted and were hostile to the police. But not without reason. The notorious "sus" laws allowed widespread stop and search of black youths, while racial harassment and assault against black people was rarely taken seriously or investigated properly by the police. A colleague of mine, a Jamaican Pentecostal Pastor was victim to an unprovoked attack by a white thug on a bus late one Saturday night, and it was he who was arrested, charged and had to go to the appeal court before his name was cleared. My African housemate was assaulted on his way home one evening and the police simply did not want to be bothered. It only took me a year or two to realize that as a Christian I should be passionately concerned for racial justice.

I found a group of fellow travellers in an organisation called Evangelical Race Relations group which subsequently became Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice. It was started by a number of white clergy working in multi-racial parishes but soon became a multi-racial fellowship of people who saw what Paul meant in Ephesians 2 about the walls being broken down in Christ and the formation of a New Humanity. We were concerned about racism in society, but even more about racism in the church. Many Black Christians had testimonies of rejection from the white majority churches, there was evidence that their ministry and leadership gifts were being ignored, and new Black Majority, Black led churches were proliferating and the communities from which they were drawn were in the worst housing, worst jobs and worst schools in the country. Across the world the struggle for justice in South Africa was at its height. At the same time Evangelical Church Growth experts were suggesting that churches would flourish and grow if they were "homogeneous units" if they concentrated their ministry on a single ethnic or social group. My response, attacking the nonsense of this teaching on both sociological grounds was a booklet called "Christian Ethnics".

<http://gregsmith.synthasite.com/resources/Christian%20Ethnics%201983b.pdf>

Most theology up to this point had been done, or at least been written up by white males, simply reflecting the reality of power distribution in the churches and society. From the 1960 onwards the inspiration from Martin Luther King and the black churches of the USA began to resonate with the struggles of Black Christians in urban Britain. By the 1980s Black Majority Churches had articulate leaders, such as Io Smith, Philip Mohabir and Joel Edwards who were finding a voice, developing a public profile and producing books, documenting their struggle and reflecting theologically upon it. Organisations such as [Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice](#), the Zebra Project, the Community and Race Relations Unit at the BCC and the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership at Selly Oak produced a corpus of literature that began to form a distinctive British theology for black liberation. In the 1980s inspiration was drawn from the anti-apartheid movement and the Kairos theology which emerged in South Africa. Desmond Tutu's visits to Britain were inspirational to many. In later years Black theologies gained some entrée to the academic world. According to Wikipedia "*In the [United Kingdom](#), [Dr Robert Beckford](#) is a prominent black theology practitioner. He was the first in the UK to develop and teach a course on Black Theology at an academic level. *Black Theology: An International Journal*^[2] is published in the UK. It is edited by [Anthony Reddie](#), who has written over 40*

journal articles, essays and books and is the most prolific black theology author in the UK today.”

There was also a growing awareness in this period of the contribution of people of South Asian heritage, and among them were many Christians. In East London Tamil and Urdu speaking congregations were formed and began to grow. And a handful of people from Hindu, Sikh and Muslim backgrounds discovered Jesus and were baptised as Christians. But they too found the experience of racism from the mainstream church uncomfortable. In addition many like my friend Raj Patel needed to ask what was cultural about Christianity, and which religious practices and beliefs drawn from their deeply religious Asian culture could be translated with integrity into a Christian worldview and lifestyle. Thus from the concern to build a just multi-racial and multi-cultural society we moved on to thinking through how we could live as Christians in a multi-faith society, a question which became more pressing as Muslim communities increased in numbers and confidence, and Islamophobia emerged and polarised in the new millennium in response to the notorious evils perpetrated by a small network of extremists. For some thinking which is grounded in urban experience Richard Sudworth's "[Distinctly Welcoming - Christian presence in a multi-faith society](#)" is essential reading and perhaps the only book on the subject that fits within the genre of Urban Theology. Also recommended are various books written or edited by, Steve Bell see <http://graceformuslims.org/> and the book ... [Between Naivety and Hostility: Uncovering the Best Christian Responses to Islam in Britain](#).

And now in 2016 we are faced with two key issues which have impacts across the globe and in our own neighbourhoods. The first is around conversion and freedom of religion. In the West it is taken for granted that religion is a matter of individual and personal choice and everyone can believe and practice what they like. In some countries it is far more complex. Religious identity has social implications and obligations, and sometimes political implications. You cannot easily change religion without meeting hostility from your family, your community and your government. The obvious places where there are problems are Muslim majority countries, but I'm well aware it is far from simple in China, India and many other countries. Some people fleeing the consequences end up in the UK and need the support our churches can offer.

I- arrived in the UK in May 2013 and claimed asylum on the grounds that she had converted from Islam to Christianity, had been abused and rejected by her husband and family and could not safely return to Pakistan. She presented at a parish church with her five year old daughter saying she was desperate and homeless as the distant relative she had stayed with for a few days had told her to go. A family in the church offered to house them overnight in their spare room. This eventually extended to over two years. Members of the church and friends in other local congregations supported them practically, emotionally and spiritually. The child was enrolled in a local school and some out of school activities. Drawing help and advice through our national networks we assisted in preparing I's claim dossier to the Home Office. After an interview in Liverpool in early 2015 they got permission to stay in the UK in March. We then helped with the transition to mainstream benefits - JSA, Housing Benefits and tax credits. In August I.. and her daughter moved into their own home (rented from a church family) and have sustained the tenancy since then. The church job club

assisted in explaining the job search requirements and CV writing. I. currently has a place on a catering course at the FE college and is hoping to qualify this summer and take up a part time job as a cook.

The second is around asylum seekers and refugees who are fleeing the conflicts and wars and oppressions of government in Syria and places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Eritrea. Of course there are limits to the numbers a country can welcome, but it's clear that the UK has been one of the most mean spirited of all the nations of the world and the numbers who are welcomed here are so far tiny. Thank God there are Christian projects like the Boaz Trust here in Manchester and Christian people and churches that remember as the people of Israel used too that they share a heritage of being exiles..

Deuteronomy 26.5 "You shall answer and say before the LORD your God, 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. ⁶And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and imposed hard labour on us....

KEY Question: How do we respond to the issues of racial justice inequality and ethnic exclusion? Where does an ethnically specific church fit in Christ's universal church and the local ecology of Christianity?

Christians in Politics and Social Action

The 1980s were the decade of Thatcherism, the deindustrialisation of Britain and sharp social and political conflict, culminating in waves of urban “riots” in 1981 and 1985 and in the miners’ strike of 1984-85. On the very day of the first Brixton riots in April 1981 the evangelical tribes of urban mission were meeting in Birmingham for the launch of the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission. The Brixton events and the subsequent report by Lord Scarman were the stimulus for Archbishop Runcie to launch his Commission for Urban Priority Areas which produced the Faith in the City Report published in December 1985. Dismissed by one government source as “naïve Marxism” (naïve it may have been in some of the recommendations – but Marxist it never was) the report seemed to elevate the Church of England to the status of official opposition at a time when the Labour party was in disarray and incapable of winning an election. Following FITC there was a flourishing of urban theology in the UK, from almost all quarters of the church at academic and popular levels.

Many of us who were concerned about poverty and injustice looked for a theology which would inspire us to work for political change. We found plenty in the Bible in the teaching of prophets such as Amos, Micah and Isaiah, and we also found models of great people of God serving in public office, Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah and Queen Esther. We discovered the word Shalom, and God's concern for wholeness, peace, justice and human flourishing for all humankind. Finally there was the vision of the coming city of God, the new heavens and the new earth where there are no tears, no injustice and healing for all the nations.

In Newham many of us became committed to local political activity. As the borough was effectively a one party state we ended up joining the Labour Party. Several took leading roles in the Party, became school governors or got elected as Councillors. One became leader of the Council and then the Local MP and finally after 1997 a government minister. We prayed regularly and plotted together. We linked up with other Christians in politics in neighbouring boroughs and on occasions with those from other political parties. I wrote about the politics of Newham and the role of faith within it here

[Smith G. Faith in Local Government: The emergence of religion in the politics of an Inner London Borough 1975-2006:](#)

in *The Politics and Religion Journal* Volume IV (No. 2) - Autumn 2010

ISSN 1820 - 659X (online)

Of course party politics is not the only way of doing politics. There are plenty of single issue pressure groups and in recent years a new form of broad based democratic politics, which brings organisations such as churches, schools and trade unions together to campaign on such issues as housing, the living wage and refugee rights. Citizen's UK has become a powerful alternative movement working for the common good, especially across London, though branches are now being established in the North of England.

KEY Question: What roles should Christians play in politics and standing up for social justice? Is it likely that Chinese Christians will get involved in political work? Would you church want to join Citizens UK?

Part 2

Our God of justice - faith based social action...

In the early 1980s David Sheppard the Bishop of Liverpool wrote a book with the title "Bias to the Poor?" He linked some of the questions that had arisen from Britain's inner cities via the Faith in the City report to some of the questions which were being asked by theologians of liberation in Latin America, and other parts of the Global South where the majority of people were faced with even starker poverty and often downright oppression. What does it mean to say that God cares for the poor, He hears their cries and fundamentally he is on their side? The Bible especially the Psalms and the prophets continually reinforces this theme,

for example Psalm 146

¹ *Praise the LORD.^[a]*

Praise the LORD, my soul.

² *I will praise the LORD all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.*

³ *Do not put your trust in princes,
in human beings, who cannot save.*

⁴ *When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.*

⁵ *Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God.*

⁶ *He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.*

⁷ *He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.*

The LORD sets prisoners free,

⁸ *the LORD gives sight to the blind,
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
the LORD loves the righteous.*

⁹ *The LORD watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.*

¹⁰ *The LORD reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.*

If God *upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry*, what is our responsibility as His church? Historically the church has been pretty good at giving food, at offering charity, though we have not often been very good at social justice,

and too often on the side of the oppressors. At times we have read the Bible making everything spiritual and other worldly, preaching "pie in the sky when you die" but have forgotten the example of the Good Samaritan. Fortunately since the first [Lausanne conference in 1974](#) evangelicals have rediscovered the concept of holistic mission and the social activist tradition that was a key factor of Methodist and subsequent revivalism. And there are many Christian voices standing up today crying "Justice", for example against human trafficking, on behalf of the persecuted church or more recently in the UK when the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke out against the pay day lenders and eventually persuade the government to place a limit on extortionate interest rates.

Thus in Britain today the current context is one where the church, with evangelicalism in the forefront is developing widespread programmes of charitable social action. Organisations offering franchise operations to churches wishing to serve their communities have flourished. The most well known are the [Trussell Trust](#) with its food banks, [Christians Against Poverty](#) with its money management courses and debt counselling, [Redeeming Our Communities](#) with its Youth Cafe projects and [Street Pastors](#) with its late night teams patrolling city centres and UPA neighbourhoods. All of these have an evangelical ethos and would say they are not ashamed of the gospel, but operate on the principle that actions often speak louder than words. In many places they assemble teams drawn from a wide range of congregations and denominations. For example in recent commissioning service for Street Pastors in Preston over 65 trained volunteers drawn from over 30 churches came together to worship in the context of a city centre night club. The [Church Urban Fund](#) has developed a strategy to develop ecumenical co-operation in tackling poverty together at the diocesan level. In several areas formal partnerships in the first place between Anglicans and Methodists have been established as [Joint Ventures](#) but offering a "generous table" for the widest range of churches, In Birmingham this has led to a weekly rota of churches providing a night shelter for the homeless, in Preston a food bank delivered by the Salvation Army is supported by donations from most of the churches, and from community and faith groups including local mosques.

Over the last 15 years I have been involved in a lot of research and writing on these themes which you might want to look at..

September 2002 on a [JRF](#) funded research project on (click below for summary findings)

[**Engaging Faith Communities in Urban Regeneration**](#)

set up in collaboration with Coventry University and Sheffield Hallam University.

Published Papers linked to this project include:

- Smith G. (2004). "Implicit Religion and Faith Based Urban Regeneration" ... in *Implicit Religion* VI 7 No 2 August 2004
- Smith G. (2004). "Faith in Community and Communities of Faith? Government Rhetoric and Religious Identity in Urban Britain." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* Vol. 19, No. 2, May 2004

- Smith G. (2003). [Faith in the Voluntary Sector : A common or distinctive experience of religious organisations?](#) Manchester, Working Papers in Applied Social Research, Dept of Sociology: University of Manchester.

Great gulfs or chasms Greg Smith on the Bridge Builders Project in Preston paper presented 15th June, NCVO, London at ESRC NCVO seminar on Faith-based voluntary action, published report from the ESRC or available on the web [HERE](#)

April 2015 "**Faith, Progressive Localism & the Hol(e)y Welfare Safety Net**"
ebook for the [William Temple Foundation](#)

An analysis of the British welfare system takes a candid look at the role of faith-based organisations, asking how and why these groups have tried to plug service gaps. With case studies from local authorities in North West England, Greg Smith brings together and builds on some of the most significant research on religion, poverty and the welfare state from over the last decade. "**Faith, Progressive Localism & the Hol(e)y Welfare Safety Net**" is available to download now." Kindle version £2.99
<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Progressive-Localism-Welfare-Safety-Temple-ebook/dp/B00W1SLFW6/>

There is lots of wonderful work going on but three features about what churches do always worry me:

1. They always seem to do it on their own without reference to other professional or public service - at the best in partnership with churches similar to themselves.
2. They are much better at charity than justice... As The Brazilian Dom *Helder Camara* — 'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.' We are reluctant to ask or find out "why"
3. In the UK Christian usually believe that poverty is the moral fault of those that are poor.. At the Ea we did a survey and found

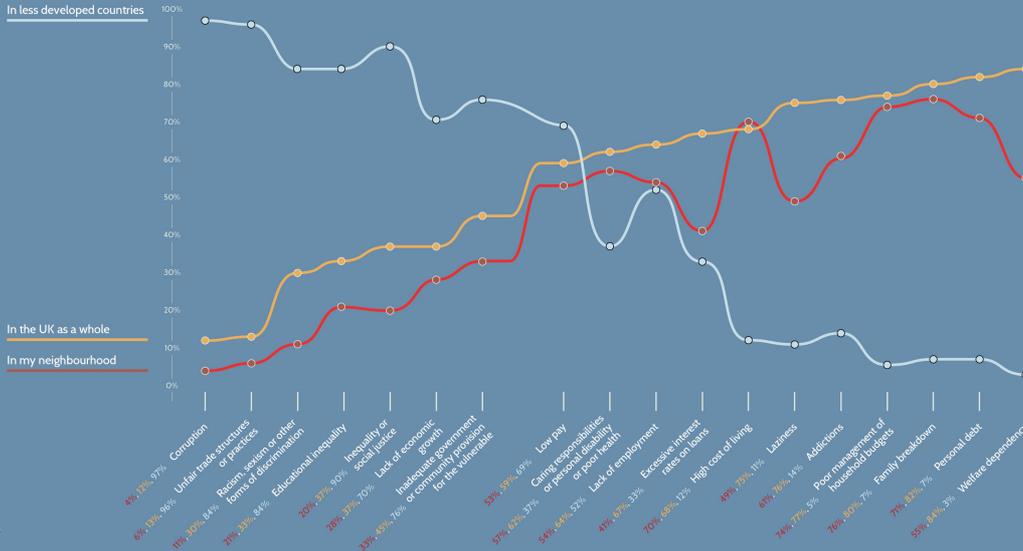
Evangelicals have very different views about the causes of poverty when asked to compare the situation in the developing world to the UK or their locality. In the graph below we can see that the top and bottom half dozen explanations in each case are almost a mirror image.

WHAT CAUSES POVERTY?

What causes poverty?

What evangelicals consider to be the top five causes of poverty

Evangelicals have very different opinions about what causes poverty overseas compared to in the UK and local areas, naming structural causes such as corruption and educational inequality abroad, and personal factors such as addictions and family breakdown within the UK.



	In less developed countries	In the UK
Corruption	97%	12%
Unfair trade structures or practices	96%	13%
Racism, sexism or other forms of discrimination	84%	30%
Educational inequality	84%	33%
Inequality or social injustice	90%	37%
*****	*****	*****
Laziness	11%	75%
Addictions	14%	76%
Poor management of household budgets	5%	77%
Family breakdown	7%	80%
Personal debt	7%	82%
Welfare dependency	3%	84%

What is happening here? Naming structural causes, such as corruption and educational inequality abroad, it looks as though evangelicals are being strongly influenced by the narratives of aid and development charities such as Tearfund, Christian Aid and the Make Poverty History campaign, in a field that the mass media

gives scanty coverage. For domestic poverty it looks as if the narratives of the popular press and media dominate understandings, and perhaps feed into an evangelical theological framework, which privileges personal sin and personal responsibility.

KEY Question: What is the role of church in welfare .. serving the whole community and partnership with secular authorities and other groups who work for shalom?

God at work in the Inner City; Secularisation or the post-secular :

What then of the state of the church in Britain today? There is little doubt about the numerical [decline in church attendance](#) among the major denominations over the last half century, the loss of the monopoly position of Christianity or the increasing numbers of people who claim to be of “no religion, especially among younger people. Statistics are regularly contested for example on the blog of BRIN the [British Religion in Numbers Archive](#) and scholars continue to debate the secularisation thesis with views ranging from the hard-line [Bruce \(2002\)](#), to the more nuanced [Martin 2011](#), [Davie 1994 & 2002](#) or [Chambers 2005](#) . The most recent comprehensive overview based on the research of the AHRC / [ESRC Religion and Society Programme](#) is the collection “[Religion and Change in Modern Britain](#)” eds. [Woodhead & Catto 2012](#). There are also debates around the concept of the postsecular e.g. [Beckford 2012](#) , and our own contributions [Beaumont & Baker eds \(2012\)](#), [Smith \(unpublished\)](#), which are relevant but cannot be considered here for reasons of space.

Yet despite the overall trends and the methodological problems of measuring religious vitality by church attendance, there are signs that in certain sectors churches are persisting, thriving and even growing. Some case studies are collected in [Goodhew 2012](#). It is clear for example that ethnic diversity has led to church growth especially in inner London, in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church as well as among evangelicals and Pentecostals. Some such churches have grown huge congregations large enough to be described as “mega-churches” e.g. [Kingsway International Christian Centre](#). Here at least there is a thriving religious market with a diverse supply of products to satisfy the religious needs of every niche of spiritual consumer in the super-diversity of the metropolis. Across the country it can be argued that the main denominations are in crisis while the evangelical/charismatic is now the mainstream for congregational life. There is evidently a resonance for current generations raised in an ethos of cultural consumption and individual choice – various genres of popular Christian music, person centred spirituality, ministry that addresses immediate felt needs, and in some cases promises of material as well as spiritual blessing at relatively small cost. Non-Christian spiritualities and therapies also compete in this market as do other Christian traditions. There are numerous strong and growing reformed biblical churches and lively Anglo-Catholic exceptions

especially in Cathedrals who offer aesthetically beautiful worship, without perhaps a radical call to conversion and discipleship.

One of the main themes of my academic life has been discovering and documenting what is going on, even what God is doing in the inner city areas of Britain. I've spent weeks designing questionnaires, doing the fieldwork, compiling databases and Religious directories. In Newham between 1985 and 2000 we discovered literally hundreds of new churches that had come into being, as well as numerous mosques, temples and gurudwaras. I was responsible for producing 3 editions of the Newham directory of religious groups. and wrote up the story in articles such as these.

1996 "The Unsecular City" in Rustin & Butler "Rising in the East" London, Lawrence & Wishart

[Smith G. \(2001\)](#) 'Religion as a source of social capital in the regeneration and globalisation of East London', (2001) Rising East, (vol 4. No.3 Spring 2001). London, Lawrence and Wishart.

Smith G. (2000 C..) ["Global Systems and Religious Diversity in the Inner City Migrants in the East End of London"](#) MOST Journal on Multicultural Societies, Vol. 2, No. 1 ISSN 1564-4901 © UNESCO, 2000

Smith G. (2006) ["Religious Identities, Social Networks and the Power of Information :Field work issues in mapping religious diversity in London"](#) in ["Fieldwork in Religion"](#) vol 1 no 3 September 2006

Most of the religious life and vitality in the UK, is among the ethnic minorities and in the big Metropolitan cities, especially London. The further you get from the centre, the whiter and poorer the neighbourhood becomes the greater the struggle of the Christian churches. Get to a place like Blackpool and to the council estates on the edge of the town and you will find little sign of formal religious life. The most resistant group to the gospel in the UK is probably the English, and especially the men of the white working class. Hudson Taylor was born in Barnsley - Go there to see how much missionaries are needed today.

Resource books dealing with this question worth reading are Tim Chester's "Unreached" and Derek Purnell's recent book "Speaking the Unspeakable" (contact <http://www.urbanpresence.org.uk/index.html>) which is inspired by his many years of work in East Manchester and his connections with UTU, both come back to this basic question. And the church in its leadership, and its concerns and its culture still remains dominated by the middle and upper classes, conservative traditions and suburban culture and focuses on its own internal issues around worship and the ordering of ministry.

Yet at the same time questions of religion and the importance of faith communities is constantly in public debate. Religion simply will not go away. Even the BBC this spring produced a Documentary on "the Battle for Christianity" presented with great insight by Robert Beckford.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/aboutthebbc/entries/f4764dfc-0774-488f-ad98-d572710169b7>

KEY Questions:

Is Britain in any sense still a Christian country? Why don't white English folk , (especially ordinary working class people, men and the younger generation) generally not want much to do with God, Jesus and the Church?

What is God calling the ethnic minority churches, the Chinese church, to do in evangelising the English?

How do we see God at work.. not just in individual lives and answers to our prayers but in the social and religious changes of our time...

How do we discern and join the Mission of God to the nations in our time and place?

Children's perspectives and Children's work

Becoming a father of two children starting 25 years ago was as for many people the best experience of my life and I loved the time I spent caring for them and teaching them when they were very small. It was through them that I seriously got involved in doing children's work in two of the churches I have belonged to and was fascinated to see how faith and identity developed and commitment to Jesus finally flourished in my own and other children. And it was especially interesting in a multi-faith neighbourhood where their childhood friends were more likely to be Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or African Pentecostal than White English and not seriously Christian. And it raises very important sociological and theological questions.

So I ended up doing yet another research project, the one I found most interesting and rewarding of everything in my career. This research which was funded by JRF for 18 months from October 2002 looked at children's perspectives on their experience of being part of a local faith community and the way this relates to the shaping of their personal identities and social and friendship networks inside and outside of school. It takes place in the context of current debates about social cohesion and the growing role of faith based organisations in public policy including the issue of faith based schools. It addresses some key questions around religious, ethnic and other social identities, social capital and social cohesion from the viewpoint of children.

The project finished in March 2004 and a report was published in July 2005. Two Public launch events took place in November 2005.

Smith G (2005) "Children's Perspectives on Believing and Belonging"
London: National Children's Bureau for Joseph Rowntree Foundation 84pp.
ISBN 1 904787 53 3

Summary Findings are available from the [JRF Web site](#)

And as we are now involved in a church with a church school next door where more than half the children are Muslim we are discovering God is doing a new thing through our parish school and family work which I call "the Muslim Messy Church. This is how I wrote about it two years ago.

Blurred Encounter in a Messy Church

A Victorian Gothic barn of a church, with most of the pews still anchored in place, on a cold wet Saturday afternoon in February. The parish is set in the multicultural inner city "East End" of a town in Lancashire, and like many urban churches in the North of England has struggled to survive, but remains committed to evangelical mission and community engagement. Twice a term now we put on a [Messy Church session](#), advertised mainly through the majority Asian Church primary school that stands next door. The vicar's wife, a retired teacher does most of the work of planning and preparation. The vicar himself does most of the platform presentation, and the songs we sing come out of a karaoke system involving a laptop and a power point projector, since like many inner city churches there are no musicians available. The team of a dozen or so volunteer helpers – more or less identical with the midweek home group – predominantly aged over 60, include a retired clergy couple, a pair of ex missionaries, a couple who (being inspired by the Eden Network) on retirement have moved intentionally into the parish, an unemployed mother and adult daughter, and two or three singles from the parish. All are white and definitely English.

From 3pm the church fills with parents and children, mostly families who attend the school, and maybe two or three who regularly come to worship on Sunday mornings. It's mostly women and children, though there are a handful of dads, There is a group of white working class mums, some of them lone parents, who obviously know each other and spend a lot of time chatting and letting the kids get on with the activities. But as the number of people in the building rises to 90 we realise this is the largest and most popular Messy Church we have put on since we started 18 months ago – and that over half of those attending are Muslims. One of the women is dressed in a black abaya, worn with a niqab – though she does remove the face covering when she has become comfortable with the social setting inside the church. Several other women and girls are wearing hijab (headscarf) and all are in modest South Asian dress. One of the Muslim women who had encouraged friends to come was a single parent whom we have come along to a Messy church a few months ago. We got to know her better through the midweek job club in the church hall. She had been unemployed, and destitute because she had been sanctioned for some trivial breach of benefit conditions by the job centre – we had helped her with food parcels, friendship and eventually to find a job in child care, and though she is not yet a follower of Jesus, she feels to be part of the church family.

After about twenty minutes to settle and play a range of table games, more or less everyone gathers and sits in pews fairly near the front. We sing a couple of child-friendly Jesus songs with actions and almost everyone joins in. The vicar then introduces and tells the story of Joseph from the Old Testament, with illustrations projected on a screen. The importance of family and forgiveness is brought out in the talk. The stories of the patriarchs are common ground between Islam, Judaism and Christianity, though no one comments on this. We then spend nearly an hour rotating in small groups between various craft activities, featuring coats of many colours,

camels and silver cups. People are invited to write their prayers for forgiveness on coloured paper cut in the shape and size of their hands and to stick these to a board at the front of the church. Finally we all come together for some active children's games which involve jumping in and out of an imaginary River Nile.

After a brief prayer grace, we then share in food which church people have brought along... sandwiches, cakes, biscuits and some fruit. Probably we should have thought more clearly about making sure there were halal options, but we have provided vegetarian items everyone found something they were happy to eat. By five of clock the helpers were anxious to start clearing up but the children were enjoying themselves in free play around the massive impromptu indoor playground, exploring the dark recesses of side chapels and climbing up into the pulpit to get a better view around the church. There were more than a few moments of panic, and some cross words, when two toddlers could not be found, and the game of hide and seek had to involve everyone until they were located and reunited with parents. Several people just wanted to stop and chat with us and each other and some of the kids were asking for more games, so it took a long time before we could all go home, tired but encouraged.

How do we reflect on what was happening on this Saturday afternoon in Messy church. The situation has all the characteristics of what [Chris Baker and John Reader have labelled a “blurred encounter”](#). There were a wide range of expectations and motives in the room. Christians from the church who were there with the hope of sharing the gospel, children from a variety of backgrounds who were just happy to be together and to have fun. Parents of various faith backgrounds and none who were just pleased to have something for the family to do on a cold February afternoon, that didn't cost anything, and had some free food thrown in.

Sociologically speaking the situation suggests that the parish church, though its close involvement with the school next door is able to offer a safe social space for the banal everyday encounters on which social cohesion can be built. The school and the relaxed informality of Messy Church, linked with other community involvements such as the job club offer a milieu for building bridging social capital that crosses the boundaries of communities which [some commentators see as trapped in parallel lives](#). Religion is not in itself a barrier, but rather seems to offer common ground where trust can be built. It's significant too that its an environment where women and children go first – perhaps typical male approaches to faith would be more dogmatic and divisive. There can be everyday good neighbourliness, friendship and trust across faith communities at this level. However it is also the case that in the local community there are examples of barriers and racisms, and within the local Christian church community we also have experience of painful and hostile experiences when someone from a Muslim background “comes out” publicly as a follow of Jesus Christ.

Theologically one can also ask what is going on in this situation and how is God at work? A classic evangelical answer would be that to some degree at least the Gospel of Jesus Christ is being preached, if only implicitly, or at least proclaimed by deeds and attitudes. A more liberal approach would be to stress that the values of acceptance, friendship, trust love and forgiveness are signs of the Kingdom of God, and of the Holy Spirit at work. Whether or not anyone discerns or names the name of Christ in this situation God alone knows what is happening in peoples hearts, and He

alone is the final judge of us all. It might be worthwhile to reflect on [NT Wright's recent perspectives on Pauline theology](#) where the emphasis is placed not so much on individual justification before God as on incorporation into the multicultural community of those who are “in the Messiah”. However this raises many questions about how in such blurred encounters and ambiguous social and religious spaces, people may or may not find salvation, to the extent that they believe, belong and behave (or not) as citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven.

KEY QUESTION: What is the prospect of passing on our Christian Faith to our children when they are growing up in a diverse multi-faith society where pluralism is the norm?

How is your church, the Chinese church in the UK doing with the next generation?

How messy is your church? How blurred are your encounters with and understanding of others?

Contextual Theology - The Christ of the Barking Road

One of the key things I learned in my time in East London was that the way you read the Bible and do your theology is that the place where you stand has a big impact on the way you see things. What a white male professor of theology sees may well be different from what a black woman office cleaner sees, or what a Pakistani Muslim background believer sees may be different from the view of a Chinese engineer. The implication of this is that even though there is only one God and one over-arching Biblical body of truth, there is not a single way of seeing it, there is no single teaching that can be transmitted in lecturing or preaching by a single expert. Rather the Scriptures are there to be studied and explored by the church reading and reflecting, asking questions of the text and discerning God's will together

In the light of this most urban theology regardless of the stream in which originates shares some common features, and as the Catholic, Evangelical and Radical streams intermingle and cross fertilise theologies become hard to label and categorize. See how this happens in Andrew Davey's collection [Crossover City: Resources for Urban Mission and Transformation](#). I would highlight five key features of urban theology :

1. It is a reflective practice... that is rather than taking a systematic theology from off the shelf and applying it to an urban setting, there is a provisionality as materials from the local setting, the experience of the local congregation or community project, the scriptures or the Christian tradition interplay with each other and shape and reshape the thinking of the participants. See – judge – act is the watchword... and when actions have changed the situation and are seen to have had an impact, another turn of the cycle, or spiral begins.
2. It is contextual... there is a careful listening to the world, to the social realities and interpretations of people in communities and to social analysis that draws on statistics and social science. In consequence such theology is diverse, plural and post-modern, the good news of the Kingdom (or at least the application of that good news) for a group of Somali asylum seekers in Sheffield is not likely

to be the same as for a group of street homeless guys in Blackpool. In a multicultural, multi-faith society where identities and subcultures are constructed and jostle alongside each other, it must listen to and amplify the myriad voices of those who live on the margins.

3. Urban theology usually in some way or other follows a preferential option for the poor. Strictly speaking this is not essential, as one can envisage a theology of the City that speaks from and to merchant bankers, or property developers who have power to shape whole city regions. Since with God nothing is impossible, even for the heavily loaded camel to go through the eye of a needle, the prospect should not be dismissed. However, it is unlikely to be the most congenial or priority task for those Christians who have chosen, or been compelled to live in communities of the urban poor.
4. Urban theology delights in stories. Sometimes these narratives are testimonies of blessing, sometimes anecdotes of everyday urban life, sometimes parables of Jesus and sometimes the grand narrative of salvation history in Scripture. But it is stories rather than statements of doctrine or proof texts that animate the urban church.
5. At its best urban theology is a collaborative enterprise, and while the power of information, knowledge and learning of the scholar is not to be discounted, it is in communities of enquiry, in church home groups, and community project staff meetings that the process best takes flight.

Out of my own experience and reading, and after twenty years of talking about the gospel and the Scriptures with a range of different people in East London I wrote my own piece of contextual urban theology. Smith G. (2003), "[The Christ of the Barking Road](#)" in J. Vincent (ed) "Faithfulness in the City " published by Monad press, St. Deiniols Library, Hawarden, CH5 3DF

It started with the questions my own young children were asking

- Is Jesus stronger than Allah?
- I want to be a Hindu so I can put Mehndi paint on my hands.
- Are we Christians or are we English?
- Will Parmesh go to heaven?
- Aleisha's a Hindu, so do we have to get her a Christmas present?
- It's not fair... God should have made Jesus a girl.
- If Ahmed can't eat pork and Saffron's a vegetarian why do I have to eat my vegetables?
- That man doesn't need to be homeless... Can't he share our house?
- Is it really true that Auntie Myrtle's grandmother was a slave in Jamaica?

and was structured as a short journey no more than 4 kilometres from West to East (literally and metaphorically) along the Barking Road in Newham during which you could count 44 places where religious activity evidently took place. I reflected on some of the roads travelled in the bible, the Jericho road, the road to Ethiopia, the Damascus Road and the road to Jerusalem.

After moving north in in 2011 I produced a sequel from Preston : [The Christ of Fishergate Hill by Greg Smith..](#) You too could write something similar, just step out into Manchester and walk down Oxford Road.

The problem with thinking of the Christian life as a journey is that we can get tired along the way, take wrong turnings and sometimes lose sight of the final destination.

we need to stay rooted (did I mean routed) in the vision of who Christ is

Colossians 1

*¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, **and in him all things hold together.** ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

and the destination of hope, not only for ourselves as individuals but for the whole universe liberated in Christ.

Romans 8

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Key Question: Can you identify a Christ of the Chinese Road?

How do we do a theology which is contextualised.. incarnated in the real world in which we live and move and have our being?

Where in this do you find hope for the future?

A summary : four key questions for the Chinese Church in the UK

1. What is the purpose and future of you as a CHINESE church?

- to preserve your language, culture, heritage and comfort zone as Chinese in exile in the UK?
- to pass on the faith (and/or culture) to your children?
- to reach and serve Chinese people newly arriving, or already settled in the UK?

2. How will you respond to the reality and the politics of the new poverty in Britain?

- What is your role in such ministries as emergency food banks, soup kitchens, debt counselling and job clubs?
- Can you do more for a flourishing and fairer economy by contributing business and professional skills and in partnership with secular organisations?
- What does the Bible have to say to us about injustice, destitution and rulers and societies which fail to care for their weakest and poorest citizens and is this going to lead you into political activity?

3. Where do you fit in terms of the multi faith agenda?

- You live in a diverse, globally connected urban world, where a huge variety of religions and lifestyles jostle with each other for attention. What does the claim that Jesus Christ is unique as a revelation of God, and that his offer of eternal life is the only hope for all the nations mean in our multi-faith cities today?
- Can you reach out to and evangelise and disciple people of other faiths?
- How will you as Chinese Christians live at peace with other communities working for the peace and shalom of your city (of exile)?

4 . The evangelisation of the English

- Has God brought Chinese and other ethnic minority Christians to the UK to serve as missionaries in reverse to the English?
- If so what do you need to do to equip yourselves to fulfil the Great Commission?